

CAT-Scan-tastic: "A New Brain," at the District Theatre through March 22

Written by Thom White

Monday, 17 March 2014 06:01

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 Beautiful vocalizations, rich harmonies, nuanced performances, and a fun, interesting set aside, what I enjoyed most about Saturday's performance of the District Theatre's *A New Brain* was that the musical felt both familiar and original; it's a fresh take on musical theatre, yet doesn't suggest any unnecessary effort made to reinvent the wheel. With its songs by William Finn and book by Finn and James Lapine, the piece manages to be odd, joyful, irreverent, and silly all at once, but also delivers an overarching sense of hope without being pandering or sugary.

Many of Finn's melodies are stunning, with smart lyrics, and even the weakest of this production's singers still do them justice in emotional (if not always musical) tone. I wasn't surprised to find out, while researching this musical, that it's autobiographical, as the story seems so personal, recounting Finn's experience with arteriovenous malformation and the high-risk craniotomy required to correct the brain issue. Yet despite the heavy subject matter, there's such a bright, sometimes bouncy nature to most of the songs that this isn't an oppressive tale, but rather one of optimism and endurance. And on top of that, it's great to see *A New Brain* rendered so beautifully by director James Fairchild and his cast.

 Bret Churchill takes on the role of Gordon Michael Schwinn, a composer who writes music for a children's show featuring a singing frog named Mr. Bungee (Tom Vaccaro). Churchill nails the sense of commitment to Gordon's craft mixed with frustration

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as he attempts to finish two songs for his demanding, heartless employer, both at the beginning of the play and later, when he's hospitalized after collapsing at a restaurant. His voice, too, is easy on the ears, with a mature, fine-tuned quality to it, and the only negative was that Churchill's volume was sometimes too low to hear during Saturday's production. Though his characterization of Gordon could use more layers, especially when it comes to his feelings in the face of brain issues and surgery, his sprightly optimism makes Gordon endearing.

I was tickled by Kathryn Martin's waitress, even though the character appears only in an early scene during which Gordon collapses. Her exuberance, accompanied by bows when taking and delivering lunch orders, seems like the quality of an actress who has yet to realize that waiting tables might be her real job for quite a while. While Sara King belts her way through her songs with aplomb, it isn't until her homeless woman Lisa lets loose and dances with weird, hunched-over moves during her big number "Change" that King sells her character – an abrasive beggar who might have some mental issues – as more than one-dimensional. Matt Mercer, though less a traditional singer than an actor who can sing, brings down the house when his "nice nurse" Richard delivers "Eating Myself Up Alive," sung while Gordon is in his coma; Mercer's performs with a soul and abandon beyond his vocal abilities.

Most of the musical's true sadness comes from Kiarri Andrews as Gordon's partner Roger. Not only can he sing exceptionally well, but Andrews' vocals are stirring as he supports his voice with emotion seemingly drawn from deep within his being. Roger's dreaminess is clear in the song "Sailing," in which he admits he'd rather be sailing than having sex, and his love and concern for Gordon drips from Andrews' every moment on-stage. But it's the words "wake up," in the song "Don't Give In," that make Roger's affections most clear. As Gordon lies in a coma, with wacky musical numbers playing out around him, three people tell him to wake up; the first two deliver the line as a gentle command, but Andrews speaks it as a request layered with a longing wish for Gordon to survive and return to him.

I could go on and on about the District Theatre's *A New Brain*. Tristan Layne Tapscott's scenic design, which looks like the set of a children's television show that probably takes place at a summer camp, supports the cheerfulness of the musical, while the cast's harmonies in the rousing numbers do Finn's compositions justice and then some. Vaccaro balances being a friendly children's-show host and a tyrannical boss without overdoing it, while Nancy Teerlinck will likely be an audience favorite for her cleanliness-loving, book-hating Mimi Schwinn, the rich bitch who is Gordon's mother. This is a production not to be missed, and I can't express my appreciation to the District Theatre deeply enough for the opportunity to experience Finn's touching creation.

A New Brain runs at the District Theatre (1611 Second Avenue, Rock Island) through March 22, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)235-1654 or visiting [DistrictTheatre.com](http://www.DistrictTheatre.com).